**The fall of the pied piper?**

Kamila Hyat

Thursday, Jun 08, 2023

Let us be clear about one thing: Imran Khan as a sportsperson and cricket captain for Pakistan was a formidable figure and quite naturally a hero for millions. These fans existed in Pakistan and abroad. His leadership style — a mix of aggression and clever strategies in some places — inspired others and turned him into a major hero in the country. It was this identification as a winner — and as a leader — which helped Imran begin his political success. Of course, there were many other factors behind the events which brought him to power in 2018, and he himself has accepted his links with state institutions this time. Unfortunately for Pakistan — indeed tragically for the country — Imran’s style of leadership did not work in politics. His aggression turned into something so volatile that was rarely seen before.

From politicians we need diplomacy, patience, and an ability to think beyond the single idea of corruption in a corrupt opposition. It appears that Imran and his team did not have these skills. He was essentially a cult leader. We have historically seen many a cult figures in other parts of the world. We had the Moonies cult in Korea, Reverend Jim Jones — who led his hundreds of followers to Guyana and ordered them to drink ‘Kool-Aid’ laced with poisonous substance which killed 900 or so including 300 children — and other well-known cult leaders like Charles Manson and his ‘family’ which engaged in murder and other heinous events in the late 1960s.

Pakistan has over the years had great politicians – it would be a disservice to compare Imran to any of them. They include brave figures such as Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan who spent 37 years of his life in jail but remained firm on his ideology. His son Wali Khan followed essentially in the same tradition spending a long period of time in jail. In Balochistan, Abdul Samad Khan spent the entire period of the Ayub Khan regime in jail because he refused to change his views or ideology. There are other figures such as GM Syed from Sindh who also spent over 30 years in jail not because of any political activity but because authorities did not like their stance and found it best to incarcerate them instead of allowing a democracy with true differences of opinion within it to grow and develop.

There are a few questions now: what will become of the cult Imran led? The fate of Imran himself will be determined by the courts, and by time. He could be disqualified or jailed, or he could be left to continue whatever remains of his career. But the way May 9 was orchestrated – presumably by the party – leading people to attack state buildings and installations on May 9 put at risk the lives of both young and older people, from lower-income and middle-income families in Lahore, Rawalpindi and other places.

Some of these people — in fact many of them — remain behind bars for stealing all kinds of objects, including a peacock. Their families have nowhere to go and nothing to show for what they engage in or what they did. Certainly, no ideological belief or any kind of principle was involved. They simply thought they were following a man who acted as a cult leader, and found themselves in an extremely difficult position: children and young men who knew no better and had never been taught history or politics or creative thinking at schools.

In the future, these people will most likely think a little harder. We already have some thinking taking place even now.

There are those who ask whether the May 9 events can be justified. Even some who had a role to play in them or who knew people who participated, have condemned the assault on public buildings, the burning of an ambulance and the other violent events which took place. They see the attack on sensitive buildings as dangerous. In Punjab, a majority of people have high respect for the armed forces and recognize it as a major defence force. The men in uniform stand tall in their eyes. We wonder how Imran stands now that he has been defeated and left to pick up the pieces of his shattered political career.

The events of the coming days will be interesting. We will closely analyze how the groups already breaking away from the PTI will take a shape of their own. One of them will, of course, become the new ‘King’s Party’. We do not know if the Elahi family or Tareen or someone else will become the chosen leader of this group. But it is likely that the group will do well and just as Imran was pushed into power, they will receive the same boost and similar assistance in their effort to acquire power. For Pakistan, the real question is what they will do with it and how they will handle things.

There are other questions as well. It is quite obvious that separation of powers needs to be practised in the country. This is extremely difficult and has not happened throughout Pakistan’s history of over seven decades, with hybrid regimes being the order of the day — year after year and decade after decade. There is still too much movement of various players on the chessboard to determine precisely what has to happen next and how. But we know that Imran is unlikely to play a major role in Pakistan’s politics again. Already, people are criticizing how he put the lives of other people at risk while protecting himself.

How he asked his supporters to protect him in Zaman Park, allowing them to face the police while he remained within his home protected by his supporters who had come out on May 9 in hundreds.These ‘hundreds of people’ will not be enough to bring Khan to power. The fact that more people did not come out shows that people know right from wrong and know that what happened on that day is wrong and should not have taken place. This is something from which all political parties can learn and gain wisdom.

The wisdom perhaps should match that of men from outside Punjab such as Baba Jan from Gilgit-Baltistan, who has protested for the rights of people in the region despite a long term in jail. These are real heroes. We need to recognize them and put them aside from mere cult figures such as Imran and others like him who we have seen throughout our political history.

The writer is a freelance columnist and former newspaper editor. She can be reached at: kamilahyat@hotmail.com